

**Testimony of Patric Verrone, President, Writers Guild of
America, East**

October 3, 2006

Mr. Chairman, Commissioners, members of Congress, distinguished panelists, ladies and gentlemen, I'm Patrick Verrone. I'm the President of the Writers Guild of America West. I will be making my comments brief on this subject of vital importance to our industry, to our democracy, to our free speech, and then I will return to my profession, writing a cartoon about a crab monster from outer space. We all have to make a living.

On behalf of the community of 7,500 television, film and news media writers who belong to our Guild west of the Mississippi, thank you for holding this hearing. We join the unanimous chorus of voices you've heard so far in affirming that media consolidation has consolidated into far too few hands. Twenty years ago, when I entered this business, I was nine years old. There were 29 dominant entertainment firms with \$100 billion in annual revenues. Today there are six, making nearly 400 billion. Fifteen years ago, less than a third of writing employment was controlled by these firms. Today, they control over 80 percent of it. During this time frame, however, broadcast

media, the daily bread of this Commission, has only shown modest increases in revenue and employment for these companies, increases, but modest nonetheless. The growth of these conglomerates has come through expansion of other media outlets: cable, publishing, print, internet, et cetera. I brought a chart because I felt compelled to have a prop. It's in your materials and, of course, I don't know if you can get a shot of it -- yes, you can. It indicates the vast accretion of these conglomerates -- boy, it's not a good shot, is it? Well, for those of you in the back, it shows the vast accretion of these conglomerates and just how tightly our national media is trapped within six webs of control.

The ideas that are the vital raw material of our country's democratic process are mostly funneled through these six corporations. As a result, the free speech of Americans on all sides of the political spectrum are stifled. And both the artists we represent and the viewers and listeners in our audience are left out. As this Commission has noted, a diversity of contributors is essential to our nation's vital marketplace of ideas. But because control of the media is concentrated among a very few similar corporations, the common interests of these corporations

further reduces the range of perspectives and life experiences reflected in this media. The palpable affects of consolidation on TV writers, like myself, has been to reduce them to only express those ideas acceptable to this corporate voice.

Homogenization is for good milk, but bad for ideas. To this we ask, "Got ideas?" The market failure -- and we do -- the market failure, we have observed, is not limited to the figurative marketplace of ideas. We see a failure of the literal economic marketplace as well. While star salaries make the headlines, and even those are being curbed -- it's why you shouldn't jump on Oprah's furniture -- it is the middle class among the talent community in Hollywood who do most of the work. And these are the folks who are being squeezed out.

Consolidation has led to tighter production budgets, which leads to smaller writing staffs, which leads to lower earnings and shorter careers. This is especially true in children's television, in non-fiction programming, which have all but disappeared from the prime time broadcast schedule, relegated to cable and other outlets where they are significantly under-budgeted.

In the meantime, the shelf space of the broadcast

schedule has been filled with reality and so-called unscripted programming which refuses to even recognize the fact that it has writers and that writers are serving not the demands of storytelling and character development, but of advertiser whim and product integration. And may I say, when testifying before a Commission, Voss is the water of choice.

This Commission has many options to address the consolidation of American media. You've heard some of them today. At this time, as we go to a yellow light, let me quote another writer, "The men of wealth who today are trying to prevent the regulation and control of their business in the interests of the public by the proper government authorities will not succeed, in my judgment, in checking the progress of this movement." That quote was from Theodore Roosevelt who, though he made his living chiefly as an adult as a writer, also had other claims to fame. He spoke those words almost 100 years ago today. He went on to say, "But if they did succeed, they would find that they had sewn the wind and would surely reap the whirlwind, for they would ultimately provoke the violent excesses which accompany reform, coming by convulsion instead of by steady and natural growth."

The talent community appearing before you is

anxious to see this industry continue to thrive and succeed as no other American industry does on the global stage, but we want the steady and natural growth of which Roosevelt spoke. We urge this Commission to continue -- to consider its rules under review accordingly.

Normally, when I conclude these discussions, I warn my listeners that I do not have time to read their screenplays. For this group, I will make an exception. Thank you for your attention.